



**Department of  
Veterans Affairs**

Office of Public Affairs  
Media Relations

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# **Fact Sheet**

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## **Facts about the Department of Veterans Affairs**

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) was established on March 15, 1989, succeeding the Veterans Administration. It is responsible for providing federal benefits to veterans and their families. Headed by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, VA is the second largest of the 15 Cabinet departments and operates nationwide programs for health care, financial assistance and burial benefits.

Of the 26 million veterans currently alive, nearly three-quarters served during a war or an official period of conflict. About a quarter of the nation's population, approximately 70 million people, are potentially eligible for VA benefits and services because they are veterans, family members or survivors of veterans.

The responsibility to care for veterans, spouses, survivors and dependents can last a long time. The last dependent of a Revolutionary War veteran died in 1911. Six children of Civil War veterans still draw VA benefits. About 440 children and widows of Spanish-American War veterans still receive VA compensation or pensions.

VA's fiscal year 2004 spending was \$62.1 billion -- \$29.1 for health care, \$32.4 billion for benefits, and \$143 million for the national cemetery system. President Bush sought \$67.7 billion in the fiscal year 2005 budget for VA, a \$5.6 billion increase in budget authority, primarily for health care and disability compensation.

### **Compensation and Pension**

Disability compensation is a monetary benefit paid to veterans who are disabled by injury or disease incurred or aggravated during active military service. Veterans with low incomes who are permanently and totally disabled may be eligible for monetary support through VA's pension program. In fiscal year 2003, VA provided \$26 billion in disability compensation, death compensation and pension to 3.4 million people. About 2.8 million veterans received disability compensation or pensions from VA. Also receiving VA benefits were 568,146 spouses, children and parents of deceased veterans. Among them are 147,291 survivors of Vietnam-era veterans and 272,883 survivors of World War II veterans.

### **Education and Training**

Since 1944, when the first GI Bill began, more than 21 million veterans, service members and family members have received \$77 billion in GI Bill benefits for education and training. The number of GI Bill recipients includes 7.8 million veterans from World War II, 2.4 million from the Korean War and 8.2 million post-Korean and Vietnam era veterans, plus active duty personnel. Since the dependents program was enacted in 1956, VA also has assisted in the education of more than 750,000 dependents of veterans whose deaths or total disabilities were service-connected.

Since the Vietnam-era, there have been approximately 2 million veterans, service members, reservists and National Guardsmen who have participated in the Veterans' Educational Assistance Program, established in 1977, and the Montgomery GI Bill, established in 1985.

In 2003, VA helped pay for the education or training of 322,754 veterans and active-duty personnel, 88,342 reservists and National Guardsmen and 61,874 survivors.

### **Medical Care**

Perhaps the most visible of all VA benefits and services is health care. From 54 hospitals in 1930, VA's health care system has grown to 158 hospitals, with at least one in each of the 48 contiguous states, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia. VA operates 854 ambulatory care and community-based outpatient clinics, 132 nursing homes, 42 residential rehabilitation treatment programs and 88 comprehensive home-care programs. VA health care facilities provide a broad spectrum of medical, surgical and rehabilitative care.

More than 4.8 million people received care in VA health care facilities in 2003. By the end of fiscal year 2003, 78 percent of all disabled and low-income veterans had enrolled with VA for health care; 65 percent of them were treated by VA. In 2003, VA inpatient facilities treated 742,000 patients, including 92,516 in VA nursing homes and 45,207 in residential care facilities. VA's outpatient clinics registered nearly 49.8 million visits.

VA manages the largest medical education and health professions training program in the United States. VA facilities are affiliated with 107 medical schools, 55 dental schools and more than 1,200 other schools across the country. Each year, about 81,000 health professionals are trained in VA medical centers. More than half of the physicians practicing in the United States had some of their professional education in the VA health care system.

VA's medical system serves as a backup to the Defense Department during national emergencies and as a federal support organization during major disasters.

During the last six years, VA has put its health care facilities under 21 networks, which provide more medical services to more veterans and family members than at any time during VA's long history.

VA has experienced unprecedented growth in the medical system workload over the past few years. The number of patients treated increased by 5.7 percent from 2002 to 2003.

To receive VA health care benefits most veterans must enroll. Nearly 7.2 million veterans were enrolled in the VA health care system as of October 2003. When they enroll, they are placed in priority groups or categories that help VA manage health care services within budgetary constraints and ensure quality care for those enrolled.

Some veterans are exempted from having to enroll. People who do not have to enroll include veterans with a service-connected disability of 50 percent or more, veterans who were discharged from the military within one year but have not yet been rated for a VA disability benefit and veterans seeking care for only a service-connected disability.

Veterans with service-connected disabilities receive priority access to care for hospitalization and outpatient care.

Since 1979, VA's Readjustment Counseling Service has operated Vet Centers, which provide psychological counseling for war-related trauma, community outreach, case management and referral activities, plus supportive social services to veterans and family members. There are 206 Vet Centers.

Since the first Vet Center opened, approximately 1.7 million veterans have been helped. Every year, the Vet Centers serve over 126,000 veterans and provide over 950,000 visits to veterans and family members.

Vet Centers are open to any veteran who served in the military in a combat theater during wartime or anywhere during a period of armed hostilities. Vet Centers also provide trauma counseling to veterans who were sexually assaulted or harassed while on active duty..

VA provides health care and benefits to more than 100,000 homeless veterans each year. While the proportion of veterans among the homeless is declining, VA actively engages veterans in outreach, medical care, benefits assistance and transitional housing. VA has made more than 300 grants for transitional housing, service centers and vans for outreach and transportation to state and local governments, tribal governments, non-profit community and faith-based service providers.

Programs for alcoholism, drug addiction and post-traumatic stress disorder have been expanded in recent years, along with attention to environmental hazards.

Indispensable to providing America's veterans with quality medical care are more than 130,000 volunteers in VA's Voluntary Service who donate 13 million hours each year to bring companionship and care to hospitalized veterans.

### **Research**

In 2003, funding for VA research was \$392 million. Another \$403 million from VA's medical care account supports research efforts. Funding from non-VA sources, such as the National Institutes of Health, other government agencies and pharmaceutical companies, contributed another \$656 million to VA research. VA currently conducts more than 10,000 research projects at more than 100 VA medical centers.

While providing high quality health care to the nation's veterans, VA also conducts an array of research on some of the most difficult challenges facing medical science today. VA has become a world leader in such research areas as aging, women's health, AIDS, post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health issues. VA research has improved medical care for veterans and the nation.

VA researchers played key roles in developing the cardiac pacemaker, the CT scan, radioimmunoassay and improvements in artificial limbs. The first liver transplant in the world was performed by a VA surgeon-researcher. VA clinical trials established the effectiveness of new treatments for tuberculosis, schizophrenia and high blood pressure. The "Seattle Foot" developed in VA allows people with amputations to run and jump. VA contributions to medical knowledge have won VA scientists many awards, including the Nobel Prize and the Lasker Award.

Seventy-five percent of VA researchers are practicing physicians. Because of their dual roles, VA research often immediately benefits patients. Functional electrical stimulation, a technology using controlled electrical currents to activate paralyzed muscles, is being developed at VA clinical facilities and laboratories throughout the country. Through this technology, paraplegic patients have been able to grasp objects, stand and even walk short distances.

Special VA “centers of excellence” throughout the nation conduct research in rehabilitation, health services and medical conditions including AIDS, alcoholism, schizophrenia, stroke and Parkinson’s disease. Multi-center clinical trials investigate the best therapy for various diseases. Current projects include testing aspirin therapy for heart patients, surgical treatment to reduce the risk of stroke and treatment options for prostate cancer.

VA investigators continue to make major contributions to the understanding of post-traumatic stress disorder and Agent Orange exposure, both research areas resulting from the Vietnam War. VA has conducted a number of Gulf War-related research projects and has two environmental hazards research centers focusing on the possible health effects of environmental exposures among Gulf War veterans.

### **Home Loan Assistance**

From 1944, when VA began helping veterans purchase homes under the original GI Bill, through January 2004, about 17.4 million VA home loan guarantees have been issued, with a total value of \$812 billion. VA began fiscal year 2004 with 2.7 million active home loans reflecting amortized loans totaling \$213.2 billion.

In fiscal year 2003, VA guaranteed 508,436 loans valued at \$65 billion. VA’s programs for specially adapted housing helped about 550 disabled veterans with grants totaling more than \$22 million last year.

### **Insurance**

VA operates one of the largest life insurance programs in the world. VA directly administers six life insurance programs with 1.8 million policies in force. In addition, VA supervises the Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance and the Veterans' Group Life Insurance programs. These programs provide \$729 billion in insurance coverage to 2.8 million veterans, active-duty members, reservists and Guardsmen, plus 3.1 million spouses and children.

In 2003, the VA life insurance programs returned \$569 million in dividends to 1.5 million veterans holding some of these VA life insurance policies, and paid an additional \$2.42 billion in death claims and other disbursements.

### **Vocational Rehabilitation**

VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program provides services to enable veterans with service-connected disabilities to achieve maximum independence in daily living, and, to the maximum extent feasible, to obtain and maintain employment. During fiscal years 1998 through 2003, 52,423 program participants achieved rehabilitation by obtaining and maintaining suitable employment. Additionally, during that same period, 7,658 participants achieved rehabilitation through maximum independence in daily living.

### **VA's National Cemeteries**

In 1973, the Army transferred 82 national cemeteries to VA, which now manages them through its National Cemetery Administration. Currently, VA maintains 120 national cemeteries in 39 states and Puerto Rico.

In 2003, VA national cemeteries conducted 89,755 interments. That number is likely to increase to 109,000 in 2008. In 2003, VA provided 344,845 headstones or markers for veterans' graves. Since taking over the veterans cemetery program in 1973, VA has provided more than 8.4 million headstones and markers.

Between 1999 and 2002, VA opened five new national cemeteries: the Gerald B. H. Solomon Saratoga National Cemetery near Albany, N.Y.; the Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery near Chicago; the Dallas-Fort Worth National Cemetery; the Ohio Western Reserve National Cemetery near Cleveland; and the Fort Sill National Cemetery near Oklahoma City. In the next five years, VA plans to open five more national cemeteries-near Atlanta, Detroit, south Florida, Sacramento, Calif., and Pittsburgh. Future plans include six new national cemeteries near Philadelphia, Pa., Jacksonville, Fla., Sarasota, Fla., Birmingham, Ala., Greenville / Columbia, S.C., and Bakersfield, Calif. By 2009, these 11 cemeteries will help VA serve 89 percent of veterans with a national cemetery or state veterans cemetery within 75 miles of their homes.

VA administers the Presidential Memorial Certificate program, which provides gold embossed certificates signed by the president to commemorate honorably discharged, deceased veterans. They are sent to the veteran's next of kin and loved ones. VA provided 254,632 certificates in 2003.

VA also administers the State Cemetery Grants Program, which encourages development of state veterans cemeteries. VA provides up to 100 percent of the funds to develop, expand or improve veterans cemeteries operated and maintained by the states. More than \$175 million has been awarded for 54 operational veterans cemeteries in 30 states and Guam. Five state cemeteries are under construction. In 2003, state cemeteries that received VA grants buried 18,192 eligible veterans and family members.

### **VA Employees**

As of January 31, 2004, VA had 232,172 employees on the rolls. Among all departments and agencies of the federal government, only the Department of Defense has a larger work force. Of the total number of VA employees, 210,432 were in the Veterans Health Administration, 12,962 in the Veterans Benefits Administration, 1,498 in the National Cemetery System, 3,193 in the Veterans Canteen Service and 425 in the Revolving Supply Fund. The rest -- 3,662 employees -- are in various staff offices

VA is a leader in hiring veterans. About 52 percent of all male employees are veterans. As of January 31, 2004, VA had 9,786 women employees who served in the U.S. armed forces. About 57 percent of male and 28 percent of female veteran employees served during the Vietnam War. More than 7 percent of all VA employees are disabled veterans and four hold the Medal of Honor.

## **Chronological History of the Department of Veterans Affairs**

- 1930....The Veterans Administration created by Executive Order 5398, signed by President Herbert Hoover on July 21. At that time, there were 54 hospitals, 4.7 million living veterans and 31,600 employees.
- 1933...The Board of Veterans Appeals established.
- 1944....On June 22, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the "Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944" (Public Law 346, passed unanimously by the 78th Congress), more commonly known as "The GI Bill of Rights," offering home loan and education benefits to veterans.
- 1946....The Department of Medicine & Surgery established, succeeded in 1989 by the Veterans Health Services and Research Administration, renamed the Veterans Health Administration in 1991.
- 1953....The Department of Veterans Benefits established, succeeded in 1989 by the Veterans Benefits Administration.
- 1973....The National Cemetery System – renamed the National Cemetery Administration in 1998 – created when Congress transferred 82 national cemeteries from the Army to VA. The Army kept Arlington National Cemetery and the U.S. Soldiers' and Airmen's Home National Cemetery in Washington, D.C.
- 1988....Legislation to elevate VA to Cabinet status signed by President Reagan.
- 1989....On March 15, VA became the 14th Department in the President's Cabinet.

### **Secretaries of Veterans Affairs**

Jim Nicholson	2005 – Present	Max Cleland	1977 – 1981
Anthony J. Principi	2001 – 2005	Richard L. Roudebush	1974 – 1977
Togo D. West, Jr.	1998 – 2000	Donald E. Johnson	1969 – 1974
Jesse Brown	1993 – 1997	William J. Driver	1965 – 1969
Edward J. Derwinski	1989 – 1992	John S. Gleason	1961 – 1964

### **Administrators of Veterans Affairs**

Edward J. Derwinski	1989	Harvey V. Higley	1953 – 1957
Thomas K. Turnage	1986 – 1989	Carl R. Gray	1948 – 1953
Harry N. Walters	1982 – 1986	Omar Bradley	1945 – 1948
Robert P. Nimmo	1981 – 1982	Frank T. Hines	1930 – 1945

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